

LITHUANIAN HERITAGE

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Wind Vanes (*Vėtrungės*) On the Lagoon 6

by Egidijus Bacevičius

With their gaily painted symbols, *vėtrungės* speak to us like messages sent from the past, turning in the blue skies amid the waves, keys that help us understand the history and culture of the people who lived on the shores of the Baltic Sea and Curonian lagoon.

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A classic Lithuanian cake, perfect for special occasions. It is guaranteed to draw everyone's attention to the dessert table.

Cover Credits:

FRONT COVER: *Eglutė* magazine, Sept. 1950 cover.

BACK COVER: Hedgehog ((T. Sukprasert, shutterstock)

INSIDE FRONT COVER: Carved weather vanes (K.A. Lugmayer)

INSIDE BACK COVER: Swimming at Zarasai (Al Jaffee)

THIS PAGE: TOP: *Vėtrungės* (Bacevičius); MIDDLE: *Eglutė* (epaveldas.lt);

BOTTOM: Hedgehog (O. Daugirdienė)



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A Taste of Lithuania: Reconnecting with Culture Through Cooking

by Jennifer Virškus

I first came across Ginger Dragon in the “Our Mom’s Lithuanian Recipes” Facebook group, where she posts beautifully composed photographs of perfectly crafted dishes. A pile of crispy *bulviniai blynai* garnished with fresh dill and sour cream served on a woodblock, bowls of bright pink *šaltibarščiai* garnished with egg, dill, radish, and green onion, served with roasted potatoes and decorated with bright spring blooms, and individual Thanksgiving “*kugeliukai*” garnished with bacon bits and sour cream – Ginger posted a video of the golden and gooey first bite, set to the Lithuanian national anthem. I dabble myself in Lithuanian cooking, occasionally whipping up a batch of mushroom-filled *koldūnai* or some *žuvis su pomidorais* on Christmas Eve. Still, while tasty, my dishes never look as good as hers. So when I got the call from this magazine for story ideas for 2021, I jumped at the chance to interview the woman behind the stunning *medaus tortas* that keeps popping up in my timeline.

Ginger Dragon – that is her real name – is Lithuanian- and Chinese-American. Her mother immigrated from Hong Kong in the 1960s, and her father was born in Chicago. His father and mother immigrated from Žemaitija in 1913, from Užventis and Žygaiciai,

respectively, settling in the Chicago’s Brighton Park neighborhood, which was home to a large number of Lithuanians from the first and second waves. “My mom didn’t particularly like my father’s surname, which was Bardauskas, but she also didn’t want to give me her maiden name, so they decided to name me after their restaurant, Gourmet Dragon. It worked for them because it sounds like it could be Chinese or Lithuanian, as there’s a very small town called Drakonas,” she explained. “And, my mom loved Ginger on *Gilligan’s Island*. She thought she was very glamorous.”

Being named after a restaurant, it’s not surprising that Dragon loves to cook, and she’s been cooking since she was a girl. The family lived with her Lithuanian grandmother until she died at 97 – Dragon was just seven (her father was 56 when she was born). “I don’t have decades and decades of memories with her, and that’s something I’m sad about. Cooking for me, making Lithuanian food, I feel very connected to her. Even if I think of new and inventive ways to either plate things or make the recipes my own with little twists, I feel like I’m honoring her.”

As a child, Dragon was a vegetarian. Her father had given up meat to lose the extra weight he’d gained in his youth eating too many rich potato dishes cooked with bacon and lard. “My grandmother would make me a separate *kugelis* that she ‘claimed’ had no meat, but if it really had no meat, it probably wouldn’t have tasted



Ginger Dragon and her *Napoleonas* torte.



Ginger Dragon as a young girl with her father and mother.



Ginger's paternal grandmother Leokadija (center) and her grandfather Vincentas Bardauskis (back) at their home in Brighton Park.

as good, so I'm sure she snuck in some grease or fat," recalled Dragon, who now eats a mostly plant-centered diet but does enjoy *kugelis* topped with *spirgučiai* on occasion. "My grandmother used to make *kugelis* in loaf pans. I don't see a lot of people doing that; it's perfect for slicing for leftovers," she added.

As a teenager and young woman, Dragon was immersed in her mother's culture, working alongside her at a large Chinese restaurant in Chinatown. She even learned Cantonese to communicate with the people she worked with. After her daughter (who is 25% Lithuanian and 75% Chinese) was born, Dragon real-

ized she wanted to incorporate Lithuanian traditions into her life; otherwise, they would be lost. They live on the north side of Chicago, 40 miles away from the Lithuanian World Center in Lemont. "If I lived closer, I'd put my daughter into folk dancing, language, or art, but I've been a student since she was seven weeks old, and it would just be too much driving. So, I figured I could do something in my own way," she said.

Though they owned a restaurant, neither of her parents were chefs, although her father was an avid home cook. Growing up, Dragon says, he would often have her do the "dirty work" in the kitchen, the painstaking work of peeling the garlic, for example (garlic was popular in their house). She learned basic skills from her father and has since enjoyed watching cooking programs on television and reading cookbooks. "It gave me a good foundation, so when I started cooking Lithuanian food or any other cuisine, I felt like I could be confident in the outcome," she said.

Surprisingly, her Chinese mother loved Lithuanian food – she was the one who used to take her to visit the Lithuanian restaurants and shops in Marquette Park. "As a kid, I only liked the hot beet soup, but *šaltibarščiai* was my mother's favorite thing, which was very untraditional of her because Chinese generally don't eat cold food," said Dragon.



Is this *kugelis* vegetarian?



Kibinai (a traditional dish of the Tatars living in the Trakai area).

Since Lithuanian recipes are relatively rare online (and many of them are in Lithuanian), she joined “Our Mom’s Lithuanian Recipes” and “I Love Lithuanian Food” on Facebook. Each group has a Files section where members can post their recipes. While the Files are a great resource, the problem (and I’ve found this too when trying to make *ruginė duona* from scratch last summer) is that many of the recipes aren’t very exact or easy to follow – they’re written down from memory with approximate measurements.

Dragon started to make various recipes, noting her steps carefully along the way, refining them through trial and error and making the recipes her own, while still staying authentic to traditional flavors, for example, *šaltibarščiai* served in a “potato bowl” – a giant potato pancake shaped into a bowl. She’s made *kopūstienė* in an Instant Pot, *kibinai* stuffed with a combination of ground pork, beef, and lamb, and bacon buns in the shape of little piggies. She’s even tackled homemade *sūris* using organic whole milk, buttermilk, salt, and

caraway seeds. Once she’s perfected a recipe, she photographs the result and posts it to the group, with very precise amounts and instructions, and even pictures of what the recipe should look like step by step.

“There are a lot of people in these groups who want to make these recipes but don’t know where to start. I wanted to make it easier for them. I do this as my way to pay it forward, to help keep the Lithuanian food tradition alive. I’ve gotten really good feedback from people that the recipes are thorough and helpful. That makes me feel good. People are more likely to make recipes that are easy to read and produce good results again and again,” she said.

As anyone who’s tried to make a homemade batch of *cepeliniai* knows, it’s not easy. Dragon said the first few times she tried to make them, they “turned out horribly, they just fell apart, and I almost cried.” She suggests cooks new to Lithuanian cuisine start with something simple like *šaltibarščiai*, especially in the summer. “It’s super healthy, and you only have to cook



Cepelinai.



There’s beauty in *barsčiai*.

the beets.” In the winter, potato pancakes. She used to grate her potatoes in a food processor and then pulse them with the blade to mimic the traditional texture, but recently treated herself to the Lithuanian-made Migiris electric grater. “It’s something I really wanted. It’s just night and day in terms of the consistency you can get with a food processor. It creates the perfect fluffy texture,” she said.

After posting a dozen or so recipes, Dragon started getting requests for a cookbook. That had been one of her goals when she was younger, though she didn’t have a particular cuisine in mind. Now, she’s working on a collection of mostly traditional recipes; she calls it a “starter’s guide” to Lithuanian food. The book, *Love from Lithuania*, will be published on Amazon as an eBook this spring and will also include the stories and history of the recipes and regions they come from.

She’s made a few discoveries along the way, too. She remembered a chip dip her father used to make when she was a girl with sour cream, garlic, and herbs. She had no idea it was Lithuanian. “It’s called *kastinys*. He didn’t use butter, but when I saw that it existed, that there was a name for it, it was fun.”

To photograph her creations, she’s amassed a collection of traditional Lithuanian linens, dishes and wood platters, and accents like *juostai*, *verbos*, and of course, flowers. “My grandmother had a big flower garden outside our home when I was growing up. She loved flowers. Carnations were one of her favorites, so I try to include carnations as much as I can in my pictures. That’s one more thing that makes me feel connected to her.”

Most of the photos are taken on her Samsung Galaxy smartphone on her front porch where there’s ample

natural light. “Food is going to taste how it tastes no matter the setup, but the experience is visual as much as it relies on taste and smell,” she said. While she wants all of her dishes to look good, Dragon pays particular attention when she’s photographing Lithuanian food to combat a perception that it’s boring, dull, or lacking in variety. The idea is to take the old recipes and put a newer, brighter spin on them. “It’s all part of honoring the tradition, honoring my grandmother and her cooking, while also elevating them to a new level.”

So, the most important question is, what does her daughter think? “She’s a really picky eater!” laments Dragon. “But she’s slowly opening her eyes to more kinds of food. She loves cake, especially when I make *medutis* and *napoleonas*, which are so light and different from American cakes. You have to bake each individual layer, and the outside of the cake, those crumbs, there’s nothing like it. To her, it’s pretty fascinating.” Dragon used to bake custom cakes on the side and still makes them for family and friends.

They have Lithuanian food at home on average once a week. “There are always some potato pancakes flying around; they’re my weakness. And they’re really easy to make with the electric grater. My daughter loves them, she just doesn’t know it yet.” Dragon tries to introduce a few customs beyond food, too. For the summer solstice, they make flower crowns and spend the day outside together.

“People come to the U.S. from other countries, and they lose their culture, the cooking and the recipes, and other things that are passed down. American culture is so centered around quick food. People don’t take the time to make things at home from scratch anymore. I’m a very culture-centered person, and I like drawing upon those old traditions,” Dragon said.

Her entry into Lithuanian culture and community came through food but then she became interested in genealogy. Ginger started to build her family tree and has reconnected with cousins she hadn’t spoken to in a long time. She’s also slowly learning Lithuanian, though notes that she can read more than she can speak due to so much time spent sifting through immigration and church documents and reading Lithuanian news. She’s a new member of the Daughters of Lithuania, and early in the pandemic, she made batches of bacon buns and gave them away to members of “Our Mom’s Lithuanian Recipes” in the Chicago area. And, one day, she hopes to visit the towns where her grandparents came from. “It’s been fun, it’s been a journey,” she says.

Buy *Love from Lithuania* by Ginger Dragon on Amazon, or follow her recipes on Facebook in the “Our Mom’s Lithuanian Recipes” group.



Have you ever seen bacon buns like these?